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Book Review

Onciul, B. (2015). Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement. New York, NY: Routledge. 268 pages. ISBN: 978-1-138-78111-5 (hbk), USD \$145.00.

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In 2006 I visited the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. The museum was fascinating, shocking histories sat next to beautiful objects. But as a museum researcher, what stayed with me were the uncomfortable tensions between museums as a Eurocentric way of telling stories and making knowledge on the one hand and the cultural heritage practices of the First Nations People on the other, whose stories, lives, and artefacts were on display. I kept coming back to questions of power: Who was telling whose stories and for whom? For instance, the café at that time sold 'American Indian' food, so as visitors we were literally able to "eat the other" (hooks, 1992, p. 21). To what extent then was the museum an exercise in presenting indigenous people and their heritage for the interest and enjoyment of a dominant majority? Where are the lines between cultural appropriation, representation, and community empowerment?

Bryony Onciul's book *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice*, takes a detailed, thoughtful, and nuanced approach to exploring the practices of power at the heart of museum relationships with indigenous people. Onciul deftly weaves her tale of community engagement, museum collections, exhibitions, and socio-political histories through four case studies of heritage projects involving First Nations People, specifically members of the Blackfoot Confederacy, and European-Canadians in museums or heritage institutions.

The four cases studies are all based in what is now the Canadian province of Alberta. They include the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, the Head Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre, which the book tells us is near Fort Macleod, the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, which is on the Siksika Reserve, and finally the Buffalo Nations Luxton Museum in Banff. The case studies anchor the text in tangible settings, practice-based examples, and the experiences of real people all struggling to find their way through the tensions involved when museums and First Nations People try to work together. Onciul's interviews, observation data, and text analysis create case studies convincing enough that in thinking back on the book I almost felt like these were examples discussed with colleagues—practical, realistic, and useful for thinking about work.

Onciul draws on Sherry Arnstein's (1969) model of citizen participation and Amareswar Galla's (1997) model of heritage engagement in Chapter 3 as well as

outlining her own concept of engagement zones as a way to describe the relationships, spaces, practices, and tensions of engagement between different communities. These concepts are used to unpick the case studies across the five following chapters. Interestingly, the book shows how models of participation or engagement do not translate easily into real practice settings. For example, Onciul shows how despite a history of community ownership and leadership, the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park was still constrained by mainstream, Eurocentric and Western contemporary museum practice because of their object conservation and display conditions. This limited what objects they were loaned, prompting concerns from the community about who 'owned' Blackfoot cultural heritage.

I would, however, have liked to see more explicit use made of Onciul's concept of engagement zones throughout the case study chapters, where instead concepts from Arnstein and Galla appeared more often as the theoretical thread through the discussion of practice. As a result, although the concept of engagement zones is well explained in the more theoretical Chapter 3, I remained unconvinced by exactly what this concept could offer practitioners or researchers by the end of the book beyond the other concepts Onciul used.

In contrast, I was utterly convinced by Onciul's arguments about the importance of recognizing the engagement experiences of indigenous people. Throughout the book Onciul questioned the extent to which community engagement really was a panacea for post-colonial museum and heritage practices. In her detailed and longitudinal case studies, she highlights the multiple ways that First Nations People have been disempowered—even if at times this may have been unintentional—through their participation in such engagement practices. In recognizing these experiences, Onciul argues, museums and heritage institutions, as well as their staff, may stand a better chance of remaking community engagement practices along more equitable lines.

Onciul unpacks the tensions inherent in relationships between heritage institutions and First Nations People. The museums were in a position to legitimize the cultural heritage of First Nations People. Not only could museums recognize and represent the practices and traditions of indigenous people, but they could also acknowledge the injustices suffered through colonialism and beyond. However, as Onciul shows her readers, community participants often focused on rebuilding community pride and were not necessarily ready to foreground painful memories such as those associated with the removal of children from their families to abusive residential schools from the 1830s to the 1990s. Onciul describes the negotiations around displaying private, traumatic, or negative histories as one of "displayed withholding" (2015, p. 190). Community participants worked to negotiate the aspects of their cultural heritage that should and should not be publically visible. Nowhere was this tension more evident than in Onciul's examples of how spiritual artefacts were stored and displayed when removed from First Nations People. Her participants explained that such artefacts were considered alive and private by their communities, such that putting them on public display, or subjecting them to the conservator's deep freeze, were considered profoundly violent acts.

In the examples from her case studies and the broader literature, Onciul explores how representation in museums is limited since the museum itself works as a framing device. In other words, the medium is the post-colonial message. Onciul explored how the expectations of visitors and indigenous people involved in engagement practices, as well as museum staff, were suffused with museum norms. Such norms, Onciul argues, limit the options people are able to imagine, support, or

enact in museum settings. For example, not only were the people in her case studies limited by funding, conservation standards, and loan arrangements, but they struggled, as we might expect, to reimagine exhibition practices beyond those they had been exposed to. Thus, despite aims to the contrary in some case studies, community engagement practices conformed to museum norms rather than those of the indigenous partner communities.

The question I asked myself throughout this book, as at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, was what if museums are not part of the solution? Compelling arguments exist from a museum or heritage institution's perspective about the value of community engagement. Indeed, community engagement appears to solve some of the thorny problems of collecting, interpreting, and displaying materials appropriated (one way or another) from non-dominant groups. Community engagement practices can, however, as Onciul points out, gloss over limitations to institutional change, repatriation, and power sharing by co-opting the agreement of community representatives. On the other hand, the direct involvement of First Nations People in museums may increase their representation and thereby legitimize their cultures, histories, and very existence such that their presence in the museum may provide a foundation for cultural or identity politics. The question Onciul pursues is that of cost; at what cost does participation in museum practices come?

Onciul describes how cultural practices of knowledge sharing, object display, and spirituality sit at odds with one another between indigenous American and European-Canadian cultures. Repatriation, although more common than it once was, has only seen a limited number of artefacts return to their communities of origin. While representation in museum exhibitions may be valuable for First Nations People, they still do not make up the majority of museum visitors in Canada, which returns us to questions about who exhibitions are for.

Onciul also explores the other key concern involved in these debates; if First Nations People are not represented, do they risk becoming invisible? Thus, while removing museums from the equation may seem like a radical option, it is one Onciul implicitly explores throughout her book, drawing on the experiences of the indigenous and museum staff participants in her study.

Should you read this book? If you work in a museum, heritage or other cultural organization concerned with issues of equity, representation, community involvement, or empowerment, my answer would be yes. Practitioners and researchers involved in community engagement, whether with indigenous populations or other non-dominant groups, would, to my mind, benefit from the conceptual framing of this book, the detailed case studies, and the reflections of the different stakeholders involved.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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